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25 September 1956

**MEMORANDUM FOR: Acting Director of Central Intelligence**

**SUBJECT : Decisions on AQUATONE**

1. Purpose: This memorandum is the result of extensive and prayerful reflection upon the future of Project AQUATONE. Its primary purpose is to urge with all the emphasis I can command that at the next meeting with higher authority you attempt to obtain full and adequate guidance on all of the alternatives open to us so that we will be in a position to chart our course of action with a reasonable degree of certainty for a number of months at least. The secondary purpose of this memorandum is to present my recommendations as to the position you should urge upon the political authorities with respect to the various possible courses of action.

2. Effect of Continued Uncertainty: Although I am sure you are familiar with many of the circumstances that render continued uncertainty undesirable, I shall venture to refer to them again. They seem to me to constitute a powerful argument against any further postponement of decisions.

a. It is not necessary to elaborate on the fact that inaction compounded by uncertainty is beginning to have a serious effect on the morale of many personnel assigned to AQUATONE.

b. If operations are to be carried on in the Far East, an immediate decision must be made as to the base from which they will be conducted. It is already too late to prepare any base other than [REDACTED] to support an AQUATONE detachment by mid-November, when Detachment C will be ready for deployment. Yet, if an AQUATONE detachment is to move into [REDACTED] a SAC unit recently deployed there will be displaced.

c. The training of SAC personnel for their U-2 unit is to begin at [REDACTED] and this unit will have nowhere else to go under present plans until March or April. If our Detachment C cannot be deployed out of [REDACTED] on time or if another one has to be brought back to be based there for the winter, the SAC program will be delayed and immediate steps must be taken to find another base for the SAC unit. We are being pressed hard for a firm decision on the availability of space at [REDACTED]

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d. If no operations are to be permitted in the near future, but if it is desired to maintain the AQUATONE capability intact, decisions are most urgently needed as to where the three detachments will be based during the winter. The location should probably be in the ZI but no time should be lost in obtaining and preparing a site if this is to be our decision.

e. Our suppliers, aware that no operations are in progress and completely without guidance as to the future, are already beginning to slacken their development and production efforts on our behalf. A suppliers' meeting is scheduled for 4 October at which it is most important to give them some firm guidance. It is in the National interest to take the pressure off our remaining development work if there is no immediate prospect of making operational use of the C camera.

On the other hand, if operations are to resume at any predictable date, it may be very important to ready these systems for use.

f. We are tying up a sizeable body of personnel, many of them with extremely scarce skills badly needed elsewhere. These individuals should not be kept idle for much longer unless there is a good prospect of using them for the purpose for which they were originally assembled. Groups especially worthy of mentioning as falling within this category are Agency commo personnel (whose scarcity is well known to you), aero-medical and supply personnel from the Air Force (who have been extremely hard for us to secure even with our priority because of their scarcity), highly skilled maintenance personnel and their technical supervisors from our suppliers.

3. Decisions Required: It would seem that the following three sets of decisions must be made (either by higher authority or within the Agency) before it would be possible for us to chart a definite course of action. My recommendations with respect to these issues and the manner of their presentation are set forth in succeeding paragraphs.

a. The major decision that has to be made is whether AQUATONE operations are to be permitted in the reasonably near future against any denied areas and if so against which areas. It is useful to distinguish four target areas:

- (1) Western Russia including Turkistan and Western Siberia.
- (2) Eastern Russia from Lake Baikal.
- (3) The European Satellites.
- (4) China.

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b. If operations are to be permitted, the second decision concerns their timing and the desired pattern of operations. Should an intensive campaign be mounted or is it desirable to accept the probability of diplomatic protests in order to be less "provocative" by conducting operations at a slower pace for a longer time?

c. If the decision is that no operations or only very limited operations will be permitted, say before next spring, then a decision is required as to whether the AQUATONE capability, both weapons system and organization, is to be kept in being in substantially its present form and administrative framework, or alternatively whether the equipment should be turned over to the Air Force and the present project liquidated.

4. How Should the Major Issues Be Presented?: It goes without saying that the USSR west of Lake Baikal is by very large margin the highest priority target area. If given complete freedom of action, we would presumably use the AQUATONE capability as we had planned against this target area until our resources were sufficient to permit us to operate concurrently with two units in the West and one in the Far East. The immediate question, however, is not what we would like to do but how the issues should be presented to higher authority. During the past two months it has generally been our feeling that even to discuss the possibility of operations limited to the Satellites or of redeployment to the Far East, or of postponing all operations until next season, would invite a decision in favor of one of these undesired courses of action. Accordingly, both in discussing future plans and in determining the deployment of our resources we have concentrated upon preparation for the major task of extensive reconnaissance over the western USSR. Undoubtedly a decision on this course of action should be the first one requested. I feel strongly, however, that if it is negative, the time has now come to discuss the less satisfying alternative courses of action and to seek authoritative guidance concerning them. Whatever our reluctance to operate over the Satellites and the Far East, the Air Force is prepared to do so. And it makes no sense to use a lesser capability while leaving a greater capability idle. Nor can a sensible decision be made about the preservation of our capability in standby status except on the basis of guidance as to the probability of active operations next spring. These considerations argue strongly against the attempt to exclude certain courses of action from consideration by silence.

5. Should We Favor Intensive Rather Than Attenuated Operations?: Up to this point it has been a unanimous view that if operations are permitted against the Western USSR, we should plan for an extremely short period of intensive operations conducted with as great a capability as can be

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employed within the limits set by weather patterns. A reading of the National Intelligence Estimate on probable enemy reactions to overflights suggests that this view should at least be reconsidered if only to be re-affirmed. The Estimate concludes that the intensity of any overflight program is one of the variables that will affect the violence of the enemy reaction. Perhaps we should plan on quite infrequent operations (say three missions per month) continued over a long period. Or perhaps we should propose intensive operations for an extremely short time (say three or four days), activity then to be suspended and repeated in a month or six weeks. I am inclined still to believe that a single major operation to continue until the anticipated protest arrives is probably the most sensible course of action but urge that alternative patterns at least be mentioned.

**6. Should We Favor Operations Against Lower Priority Areas?**

If the decision is made that operations against the major target area cannot be permitted for some time, I strongly recommend a request for permission to operate against the Far Eastern USSR, the European Satellites, and China, in that order. My reasons are as follows:

a. The intelligence to be obtained in this manner has seemed sufficiently valuable to the Air Force, this Agency, and our Allies so that we have conducted overflights against these targets in the past and are developing major capabilities (the B-57D and U-2 by the Air Force and the P2V by the Agency) to do so in the future. AQUATONE is a capability in being superior to any others presently available and this capability has a limited life which has been running out since it was fully exposed to the enemy last June. Certainly, there can be no justification for permitting such operations with a lesser capability while holding ours in idleness. It seems to me the only position this Agency can take is that these operations should go forward using the best capability available to our Government.

b. This course of action would involve negligible added risk of disclosure of our capability to the enemy, since he already can form a highly accurate estimate of speed, range, and ceiling. The reconnaissance equipment is not sufficiently advanced to constitute a major technical asset.

c. It cannot be denied that such operations might elicit additional diplomatic protests which in turn could worsen the chances of operations against the main target at some later time. If, however, the decision with respect to the Western USSR is negative now it will probably continue to be negative until there is some major change in the domestic or international climate. And I am convinced that, in the event of such a change of climate and review of the basic decision, any intervening embarrassments in the

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form of diplomatic notes from Satellite Governments or from the Chinese would not prove decisive. In any event, I see no reason for attaching great weight to this argument against Satellite and Far Eastern operations unless there is a substantial likelihood that access will be permitted to the main target area next year.

d. It is not necessary to dwell upon the other powerful but practical considerations which support this view. It will be far easier to keep the human and organizational capability together if it is being utilized. Under the spur of actual operations our remaining development will go forward faster and our equipment will shake down more effectively.

7. Should the AQUATONE Capability Be Kept in Being?: If no operations are to be undertaken for the next few months, I believe the choice between the maintenance of the existing capability, at least on a standby basis, and its liquidation accompanied by transfer of its equipment to the Air Force should be determined largely by the outlook for operations next spring. Unless there is a strong probability that overflights will then be permitted, I would recommend prompt liquidation (subject to one reservation noted below). Above all, I urge that instead of relying upon our guess as to how our own political authorities may feel in six months time, we secure definitive guidance from them by asking bluntly whether or not the prospects are sufficiently favorable so that they wish this capability kept in being and in our hands. The main considerations that bear on this conclusion are the following:

a. The basic consideration is that, in the judgment of most technically competent persons, the risk of enemy interception may be expected to become significant sometime before the end of 1957. By that time, therefore, the Project will be liquidated in any event. Unless there is a reasonable likelihood of using the capability during the 1957 season, therefore, there is no reason for maintaining it in being through the coming winter.

b. A secondary consideration is that to maintain the organization on a standby basis will require quite a major effort, since it was built up in an atmosphere of urgency and designed for a single period of active operations. Attitudes of personnel as well as a variety of administrative and other arrangements would have to be modified. This can probably be done successfully but it will be almost impossible in the absence of the conviction that we will be allowed to do the job next year.

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c. The other consideration I will mention is that to maintain this type of capability permanently in being is assumed to be contrary to Agency policy, which still further complicates the task of maintaining morale and efficiency for an indefinite period of inactivity. Quite apart from AQUATONE I believe a case could be made for reversing this Agency policy and for consolidating all of our air operations into a permanent organization considerably more self-contained than that represented by our Air Sections overseas and the Air Maritime Division at Headquarters. It might well be easier to maintain a capability in being, much of the time on a standby basis but prepared for recurrent situations in which it could be used, with such a consolidated organization which was designed to be permanent than with the present type of highly temporary arrangement. Were we to move down this road, the case for maintaining the AQUATONE capability throughout the useful life of the equipment would be much stronger than stated above.

8. Summary: Reflecting the various recommendations made above, the following is what I would urge as the desirable procedure when guidance is sought from the political authorities:

a. First, permission should be sought to resume operations against the primary target area. This would be the appropriate time to introduce the NIS and, in the light of its conclusions, to discuss the relative advantages of long, drawn out, as against intensive, operations and the possibility of operations against the major target areas but with certain allegedly sensitive districts excluded.

b. If permission to operate against the primary target area is denied, the several alternative courses of action should be outlined and permission sought to operate against the secondary target areas, with the highest priority on the eastern USSR, second on the Satellites, and third on China.

c. If such permission is also denied, the desirability of maintaining the AQUATONE capability until next season should be explored. Authoritative guidance should be sought on the prospects for next spring with the explanation that such guidance is essential to a sensible decision on this point.

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RICHARD M. BISSELL, JR.  
Project Director

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